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Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to sustainable development

Statement submitted by AARP, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of 39 million members whose mission is to enhance the quality of life for all as we age. AARP has collaborated with the UN for more than 20 years by participating in major conferences and helping to forge a global constituency on aging. Since its founding in 1958, AARP has served as a key source of information and advocacy on issues affecting aging populations by organizing policy forums, disseminating research, and strengthening the network of opinion leaders, policymakers, and advocates who believe that everyone should age with dignity.

AARP is pleased to be participating in the 2nd Annual Ministerial Review of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and to work collaboratively towards scaling up the implementation of international agreements on sustainable development. As always, AARP stands prepared to offer its experience, advice and expertise. And we look forward to the prospect of extending our collaboration with ECOSOC at the 2009 AMR which will assess progress on implementing global public health agreements.

Ever since its debut at the Earth Summit in 1992, the concept of sustainable development has shown itself to be remarkably enduring and versatile. It has become the standard by which all development is evaluated, and it has easily accommodated many emergent advocacy agendas that, at an earlier moment in time, may not have seemed germane. Global ageing is one of those advocacy agendas.

Indeed, it is now conventional wisdom that the disposition of older people in virtually any society is intertwined with the crafting of strategies for economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection – the three pillars of sustainable development. In fact, global ageing is on the sustainable development radar precisely because it is an issue that demands a long-term, multi-generational perspective.

AARP has been among the leading voices calling for policy reform in response to demographic shifts that are, at this very moment, recalibrating social compacts and transforming the way global support systems meet the needs of the ageing. From AARP's vantage point, these population shifts raise pointed questions about how millions of older people will live and what will their quality of life will be like. And of course, another question must be asked as well: how sustainable are these social compacts?

We take this opportunity to reiterate to governments and stakeholders that safeguarding the interests of older people was written into two landmark global agreements on sustainable development: Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Programme of Implementation, following the World Summit on Social Development in 1995. The extent to which both of these agreements have been enacted at national levels is the subject of our discussion here at this Ministerial Review.

In a prescient nod to ageing populations on the horizon, chapter five of Agenda 21 called on governments to formulate "integrated" national policies on environment and development that take demographic trends into account. Such policies were to be anchored by holistic development goals — including the alleviation of poverty, secure livelihoods, and good health — that served all generations. Agenda 21 also called for more regular analysis of how the age structure of populations had an impact on public resource allocation decisions on education, health care, support for the elderly.

And in chapter six of the Johannesburg Programme of Implementation, it is noted that the goals of sustainable development can only be achieved by securing society-wide health gains via poverty eradication, and by reducing the prevalence of disease. Vulnerable groups such as the disabled, the elderly and indigenous people are singled out for special mention, as poor health undercuts their participation in sustainable development.

This is all to say that, at a time when a global ageing agenda was still nascent, these two documents were probably ahead of the curve in recognizing the symmetry between the elements of a sustainable "life course" and the elements of sustainable development. For its part, AARP has promoted a version of this tripartite formulation — economic security, social equity, and a healthy/liveable environment — ever since.

In conclusion, it is our recommendation that sights should be locked on to the idea that sustainable development is an opportunity for social integration, social protection, and inter-generational solidarity. The global ageing agenda and sustainable development agreements such as Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Programme represent linked platforms that could have a profound impact on future ageing policy. AARP is dedicated to improving the quality of life for older people by supporting these platforms and helping to create a society for all ages.